



people or wind
acute and obtuse meanders
one possible river of sound

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context

One Possible River of Sound is a commission from the Rouen Metropole for the project La Forêt Monumentale installed in the forest of Roumare, Canteleu for the period between June 2024 and September 2026.

I wrote these two texts and made the accompanying video shortly afterwards. They also refer to two previous works :

One Possible Sound Field, installed at the Abbaye de Jumièges, 2019

Touch Wood, installed in many different places since 2003. The photos here are at Deltebre in Spain, 2017, and at the Domaine d'Harcourt, Normandy, 2023.

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people or wind

No one has ever asked me to choose between human beings and the wind. But if they did, I'd say I prefer the wind. It's the way it can be so subtle and sensitive. It can caress a single piece of wood with such precision that it just grazes the one next to it and produces the gentlest sound, that speaks to you immediately and even enters inside you. A human hand can do this too, but often doesn't. No, that's not quite true. Often it does, but consciously intervening can prevent you from noticing that softer sounds are more pleasant and deeper, both in tone and in the feeling they induce. But more than that, the wind can choose a piece of wood, or several, twenty meters away from you, hidden by the forest trees, and surprise you by making them sound, while the pieces close to you are silent. You might then wonder how it is that air currents are stronger in a place sheltered by many tall trees than in an open space.

I don't know where this thought might lead you, but I remember an occasion a few years ago when I installed my *Touch Wood* sound sculpture outside an arts centre in Wiesbaden, Germany. A woman started talking to me, describing how the work had moved her. She told me about her life and that her husband had died a few months earlier after a long illness. But she told me that she could feel his presence in the

sounds the wind induced in the sculpture. It gave her the impression that he wasn't so far away. I don't think any other human being could have done that by making sounds with the sculpture. Whatever the sensitivity of their playing, their presence would have been too strong to allow this fusion between a lost being and a living being. Only the wind can do it.



But the wind can also do other things. Combined with the sun, it can move the shadows of leaves on wood, creating a parallel experience for the eye and the ear. And if you choose to be somewhere inside the sculpture, it can resonate all around you, forming a symphony of random sounds, mixing hints of melody with noisy clacking and scraping that sometimes obscure the softer sounds. It gives a different perspective on the space in which it is installed. At its most extreme, in strong winds, it can produce a glorious cacophony with all the pieces of wood swaying and crashing together energetically. I like this side of things too. Once, when I installed the same sculpture in an orchard near Metz, as I was dismantling it in the autumn, I met a gardener who had lived with it all summer. He told me that it had the same energy for him as some of Joe Zawinul's music, and that he loved its richness and complexity. But I think it was also the absence of human action that excited him, the fact that there was only the sculpture and the wind, and he the listener. Yes, you could gather a group of thirty people around the work and create a dense cacophony through their actions. Of course you could, but the wind does it better, deeper and longer.

That's why I say I choose the wind.

Video link
vent ou gens
<https://vimeo.com/1042480553>



acute and obtuse meanders

But the wind can disappoint too. When I chose my site for *One Possible River of Sound* in the forest of Roumare, Rouen, I didn't realise how sheltered it is. I look up to the tops of the tall trees and see them gently swaying, yet at ground level there is only enough wind to touch my oakwood leaves, that are designed to catch the wind and make the sculpture sound, but it's not enough to percuss the musical keys, even though they too are moving. Six months after installing it, I have yet to hear the wind music produced by this sculpture. If I lived nearer I would stop what I'm doing the moment the wind blows strongly and rush to the forest, but Bourgogne to Rouen is five hours drive. So it seems I will have to study the weather forecast a few days in advance to find a windy day and then take my chance.

It's not a problem though because it's a joy to play it by hand, to discover its tonal and mechanical characteristics. The structure is fifty metres long but I concentrate on the angles, of which there are four, joining the five straight lines, each several metres long. I call them meanders but they are not the graceful curves of a river flowing across a plane, they are more like the rigid forms of a canal or a railway. The meandering comes not from the structure but from the random movements of the hanging bits of wood.



At these positions — the angles — you have access to different keys with your left and right hands and each of the four angles suggests slightly different musics. But you can't really play it as a musical instrument. It's more like it plays you. It has its own natural rhythms, based on the length of the wires from which the keys hang and on the distances between adjacent keys. You use the shuttle-shaped beaters to tap the keys but each gesture you make sets in motion a random sequence of other movements amongst the nearer keys. I think the word repercussions must have been invented to describe this effect! As I start playing, certain tonalities catch my attention so I repeat the gesture and almost manage a regular rhythm, but the sculpture doesn't want that. The key that I have tapped swings away from me and twists as it swings back so I miss it with

my next try. It doesn't want a regular melody either, it has its own melodies that surprise and even mesmerise me. I slow down. I try to blend my chosen notes with the sculpture's gentle repercussions. I hear a hint of a familiar melody but quickly it's gone. I move close with my ears and as I do so, my shoulders engage with the sculpture and make it sound differently, then my elbows and my whole body. The sculpture invites this kind of interaction. If I were much smaller I could run underneath it and play it with my head, as I've seen many children doing.

Then I step back again and listen. I don't want to impose my gestures on the sculpture, I want to hear it for what it is, not tame it, not master it. It's not made for that. I have met it and conversed with it and allowed it to tell me who it is.





So, after *One Possible Field of Sound* (at Jumièges in 2019) and *One Possible River of Sound* (here in Rouen at the Forêt Monumentale), maybe the third in the series will be *One Possible Sea of Sound* and then, who knows, maybe *One Possible Ocean of Sound*.

But before I imagine the future, there is one more thing I must do. Play my soprano saxophone with *One Possible River of Sound*. The sculpture itself reminds me of the timelessness and commonality of making music with elemental materials and aleatoric processes. At the same time, my perspective has come from a lifetime experience of listening to and playing many different forms of contemporary and traditional music. I want to bring some of that personal and cultural history back into my actions.

I play. I move through the different spaces of the sculpture and explore short phrases and abstract sounds. I touch the sculpture with my body and respond to its tonalities with my saxophone. I can't hear any birds but I leave space for them to be heard alongside me. I don't try to construct a narrative but let the sculpture, the forest and the moment guide me.

Right now, I feel complete.

video link : Forest Symphony <https://vimeo.com/1037253731>

The process and the interaction continue. But then as I have internalised the sculpture's music I forget about the sound and am intrigued by the sideways pendular movement of the keys. I push each one in turn with my hand, trying to make it swing sideways in counterpoint with its neighbour. It's a movement I hadn't imagined when I conceived the sculpture. I walk briskly along each straight line, pushing each key as I go and then I pause and look back with pleasure at the rocking ensemble. It reminds me of the ripples of a river or even the waves of the sea.

The next day, on reviewing the video I made of this process I see something else: the movements of my hands, which are quicker, finer and more varied than I imagine and react spontaneously to the surprises proposed by the sculpture, adding another dimension.

